

A HISTORY
OF ALL THE
ABBEYS, CONVENTS,
CHURCHES,
AND OTHER
RELIGIOUS HOUSES OF THE ORDER,
PARTICULARLY OF THE
HERMITS OF ST. AUGUSTINE IN IRELAND,
FROM THE EARLIEST PERIOD TO THE PRESENT TIME:
WITH
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF THE BISHOPS, PROVINCIALS,
PRIORS, ETC. OF THAT HOLY INSTITUTE.

"So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."—*St. Matthew*, v. 16.

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CONVENT OF DUNMORE,
COUNTY OF GALWAY. NOW TRANSLATED TO ATHLONE.

ACCORDING to Ware and Lublin, a convent was founded at Dunmore, county of Galway, for the Hermits of St. Augustine, in the year 1425, by the family of the Birminghams. De Burgo in his "*Hibernia Dominicana*" says, that it was founded by Walter Birmingham, ninth Baron of Athenry. Father Torelli calls it the monastery of Duamore, and gives the same date

for its foundation. According to Herrera in his "*Alphabetum Augustinianum*, vol. I, p. 204, we find that particular mention is made of this convent in the registers of the order at Rome in the year 1425, and that Pope Martin V., by a rescript dated 1430, granted an indulgence to all who would aid and assist in the building of this convent; after which, that venerable Pontiff proceeded to say, that the honour and glory of God, and salvation of souls, are promoted by the faithful and frequent prayers, merits, and example of the Hermits of St. Augustine, as the Catholic Church is instructed by the innumerable writings of their illustrious founder.

We here give the following extract from the Papal rescript:—

"Beati opera Augustini copiosa doctrinis quibus Catholica fides instruitur, ipsius ordinis fratrum Eremitarum Propagata Religio, quorum etiam fructuosa et uberrima oratione, meritis et exemplis, cultus continuus virescit in Domino et animarum salus sequitur, &c."

From the great desire manifested by these expressions of the Holy See, for the erection of the convent of Dunmore, we may easily infer the great blessings that were expected to be derived from the good example and holy lives of the venerable brethren of the Order of St. Augustine in that part of the country. The faithful continued to enjoy those blessing and advantages for about 150 years. But in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, this venerable retreat of religion and faith, was completely levelled to the ground. However, the Fathers of the order still continued near their old site; they never abandoned the neighbourhood of their ancient convent, unless occasionally to fly from persecution, until their translation in 1809, to the town of Athlone.

We find about 200 years ago, that a venerable member of the convent of Dunmore, had the honour of

suffering martyrdom for the faith. His name was the Rev. Thomas Tully. We have already mentioned in p. 93, that he was shot by his enemies at Cloughnaballybeg, in the county of Galway, for no other crime, but for that of being a Priest of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolical Church. But those were the worst days of Ireland's persecution. Then it was that the country was covered with tears and blood ; her religion insulted, her learning proscribed, and her priesthood put to the sword. In those days the same reward, £5, was offered for the head of a priest and that of a wolf ; hence the clergy were hunted and persecuted with the same avidity as the very beasts of the field. Any one that harboured a priest, or gave him protection, was considered a traitor to his country, and was accordingly cast into prison, flogged through the public streets, and afterwards had his ears cut off ; and any one that kept up a friendly correspondence with a priest was punished with death.—*See Morrison*, p. 27.

Such was the condition of Ireland in the days of Cromwell, especially of Connaught, which was converted by that sanguinary tyrant into a national prison for all the Catholics of the kingdom. At Dunmore the persecuted brethren of the Order of St. Augustine, had to fly for safety to those asylums that nature had formed, to the caverns of the mountains and wild morasses of the country : or, to use the words of St. Paul: "they wandered in deserts, in mountains, in dens, and in caves of the earth."—*Hebrews*, chap. 11. Their sufferings did not terminate with the death of Cromwell, who on the 3rd of September, 1658, was summoned before the tribunal of the Eternal Judge. The same bloody scenes were enacted under Charles II., William III., and Queen Anne.

In the year 1720, the Rev. Patrick Brehon was Prior.—*See pages 60 and 61.* It would appear that from about that time until 1809, there was an un-

interrupted succession of the Augustinian family at Mayfield, near Dunmore. In 1785, there was a Community there of seven clergymen.—See p. 71. They had a very commodious country chapel, in which the people were accustomed to assemble for many years, in order to partake of the blessings of their ministry. At length in the year 1809, at the request of the Right Rev. Dr. French, Bishop of Elphin, the Augustinian Community of Dunmore were translated from Mayfield to Athlone. In order to supply our readers with a detailed account of their translation, we give a copy of a letter written some time ago on this subject, by a member of the Augustinian Community of Galway :—

"The senior Fathers of this convent (Galway), have often mentioned the circumstances that induced them to consent to the translation of the Augustinian convent of Hermitage of Mayfield to Athlone. Bishop French frequently represented to the Rev. Father Tierney, Provincial, a religious of this house, distinguished for every virtue that could add lustre to the ecclesiastical state, the great advantage religion would acquire by bringing the aforesaid convent into Athlone; he observed that wherever religious houses were established, there you would meet with an increase of piety, frequenting of the sacraments and other holy practices, by sodalities over which religious men preside. He urged that they would have the sanction and protection of the bishops together with the clergy of the diocese; and he added, that the people of Athlone would hail their arrival as one of the greatest blessings that could be conferred upon that town. These and the other high claims that piety suggests, and religion commands, induced the Provincial to accede to the Bishop's request, and accordingly the Order purchased in Athlone the lease and interest of a small house, gar-

den, and store, which at one time served as a malt-house. On the announcement of the final resolution of the Order to translate the convent, the Fathers thereof were much dissatisfied. They had a very respectable residence, excellent house and offices, well-cropped garden, and twenty acres of prime land, well stocked and cultivated. Those advantages, together with the free offerings of the people, supported four Fathers and sometimes more. They were beloved by the people where they resided for so many generations. And the poor people about them thought some malediction would fall upon them in consequence of the departure of the friars. Tears and sorrow accompanied them on their *exodus*, and the people were unmeasured in the expressions of their displeasure with the Order for taking away their guardian angels, as they called them. Nothing but obedience induced those Fathers to forsake their country residence, and, like the exiles of holy writ, to hang their plaintive lyres on the willows, and add their tears to the increase of the neighbouring stream. What a transition to those holy and good Fathers, enjoying in abundance all the necessities of life, ever ready to exercise hospitality and divide with the poor, and having a comfortable chapel, which every successive holiday received the united offerings of flowers and green shrubs from the simple peasantry's pure hands! All these things are now changed to Athlone, and the place allotted to those Fathers for their future mission surrounded by the vices of a crowded barrack within their view; yet they were patient and resigned, knowing it was the will of God. The poor people of Athlone welcomed the Augustinian Fathers. They met in the brew-house, as they called it, to attend the solemn mysteries of religion, viz: daily Mass, the confessional, and the frequenting of the sacraments. The good work was commenced in 1809, by four Fathers, exercising the jurisdiction of the diocese, aiding the parochial clergy

at the stations of Christmas and Easter. Bishop French was overjoyed, and the greater part of the clergy joined in the thanksgiving. Those duties of the friars continued for some years, until the."—

We have been advised not to publish the remainder of the letter; it will be sufficient to say, that their right to have a convent at Athlone was disputed by Dr. French's successors, Bishops Plunkett and Burke. But their right was founded not only upon the earnest entreaty, but also upon the written approbation of the Right Rev. Dr. French, Bishop of the diocese of Elphin. We here give an exact copy of it:—

"I, the undersigned, do hereby authorize the Rev. John Kelly, and Rev. Michael Hussey, friars, to establish their chapel and chapel-house, formerly of Dunmore, in the Connaught side of the town of Athlone.

" Signed this 30th day of September, 1809.

"  EDMUND FRENCH, E. E."

By virtue, therefore, of the Bishop's sanction, the Augustinian Fathers purchased the premises already alluded to, for £200, in Athlone, from Mr. Christopher French, brother of the Bishop, upon which they established the present convent. During the life of the Right Rev. Dr. French, they enjoyed all the rights and immunities of their order. His successor, Right Rev. Dr. Plunkett, in the latter part of his life was by no means friendly to the convent. It would appear from papers before us, that the genuineness of the Right Rev. Dr. French's written permission was disputed. It is true that the document had a very unbusiness-like appearance. The Episcopal seal was not affixed to it; and it was written upon a small scrap of very ordinary paper. However, its authenticity was proved by the

testimony, in presence of witnesses, of the Bishop's brother, the said Christopher French. His testimony was written on the back of the original document. We here give a true copy of it :—

"I certify that I have often seen the within named Edmund French write, and that the article on the other side is his handwriting, and that said Edmund French was my brother, and the late Roman Catholic Bishop of the diocese of Elphin.

"Dated this 2nd day of June, 1826."

"CHRISTOPHER FRENCH,

"Magistrate for the county of Roscommon."

"I can make affd. on oath of the truth of the above certificate, at any time if required."

"W. JOSEPH FRENCH,
"DENIS RODK. O'CONNOR, } Witnesses."

We also find that the authenticity of the Bishop's letter was proved by the dying declaration of the Rev. Michael Hussey, O.S.A. We here give an exact copy of it :—

"In consequence of the opposition of the Right Rev. Dr. Plunkett, to our convent in Athlone, I consider it a duty I owe my order, (*now that my death is rapidly advancing*, as Dr. Henry has said, in the presence of the Rev. A. M'Dermott), to declare that Father Kelly and myself were induced to remove to this convent from the hermitage, (Dunmore) to Athlone, at the entreaty, recommendation, and approbation of the late Right Rev. Dr. French, and that then the convent contracted and incurred an expense of £350, for the purpose of accomplishing the same. This solemn declaration I now make and subscribe this 7th day of May, 1825.

"Dr. French moreover declared, that he would preserve the rights and immunities of the convent sacred and inviolable.

"MICHAEL HUSSEY."

From these documents, therefore, there cannot be entertained a doubt as to the authenticity of Dr. French's letter. Besides independently of these proofs nothing could be more unreasonable than to doubt the authenticity of the Bishop's approbation. Is it likely that Mr. C. French would sell his property to two priests, for the purpose of erecting thereon a religious establishment, without consulting his brother, the Bishop? Is it likely that the Augustinian Order in Ireland, would spend their money (£350), in Athlone without having the Bishop's sanction, and thus give up the indisputable possession of Dunmore for an uncertainty in Athlone? It may be asked why the order did not get the translation confirmed by Rome in 1809. The reason was this: the wars then raging on the Continent, prevented any communication with the Holy See. In 1825, when Dr. Plunkett became unfriendly to the convent, the order applied to Rome, but as a suit was then pending with the Bishop of Waterford about Dungarvan, it was thought prudent to drop that of Athlone, until that of Dungarvan would be concluded.

In 1832, Dr. French's letter with other papers, was sent by the late Very Rev. Charles Stuart to the General of the Order. The Right Rev. Dr. Burke was then Bishop of Elphin. We understand that there was a communication at that time on the subject, between the Sacred Congregation and Dr. Burke; what the nature of that communication was, we have not been able to ascertain. One fact, however, is certain that, in 1837, a rescript was obtained from the Sacred Congregation, recognizing the existence of the convent, and commanding the Bishop of the diocese to ratify and

approve of the same, as if it had been originally established by Apostolic authority. The rescript was procured by the Very Rev. John Rice, then Assistant-General of the Order. Acting upon the right of the regular clergy to build and restore their convents, (which right was fully recognised and confirmed by a rescript of Pius VII., commencing with the words, "*Nondum querelæ cessant.*"—See note E.), he addressed a petition to His Holiness, founded upon the letter of Dr. French, and the other facts already adduced. In a few days the following rescript was the result of his petition :—

"Ex audientia SSmi. habita ab infra Domino Secretario Sacre Congnis. Episcoporum et Regularium sub die nona Junii, 1837. Sanctitas sua, attenta relatione P. Procuratoris Generalis ordinis, benigne annuit, et propterea mandavit committi Episcopo Elphinensi ut attentis expositis, erectionem conventus Athlonensis Patrum Augustiniensium, approbet atque confirmet, perinde ac si ab initio, Apostolica auctoritate erectum fuisset. Contrariis quibuscumque non obstantibus.

"Rom.

"T. A. CARD. SALA, Praef.

"T. PATRIARCHA, Sec."

This rescript was sent to the convent of Galway, with the Provincial's instructions, that one of the Fathers would present it to Dr. Burke. It was first shown to the Right Rev. Dr. Browne, then Bishop of Galway, and now Bishop of Elphin, and afterwards it was given to Dr. Burke in Sligo, by the Rev. Dr. Killeen. When the Bishop read the document he said he would appeal; whether he did so or not, we have not been able to ascertain. The Order have not since received any communication from Rome on the subject, and Dr. Burke

never after interfered with the convent in an unfriendly way ; he even gave a subscription, shortly after the rescript was received, to the Prior for the improvements of the convent.

The convent is now in the same state in which it was forty years ago. There have been generally two clergymen there, one of whom usually held jurisdiction under the various bishops, namely : Dr. Plunkett, Dr. Burke, and the present venerable bishop of the diocese, the Right Rev. Dr. Browne. We here give a list of the Priors from 1819 :—

1819	Very Rev.	Michael Hussey	was Prior.
1823	"	Michael Cahill	"
1831	"	Patrick Morris	"
1835	"	Michael Cahill	"
1843	"	Michael J. Page	"
1847	"	David O'Hara	"
1851	"	Patrick Toomey	"
1855	"	Edmund Jennings	"

We understand that since the appointment of the present Prior, a lease for ever has been obtained of the present chapel ground, upon which it is expected that a new church and convent (*Deo volente*), will shortly be erected.

With Athlone we have finished the history of all the existing convents, of the Order of St. Augustine, in Ireland. We cannot, however, terminate our work, without alluding to the old foundations of the order, that flourished before the sixteenth century. We now give them in the order in which they appear in the registers of the province. And may we express our hope that the time will shortly come, when some of them at least, if not all, will again be happily revived in the land,